

Puritan Porn & Church Planting Fever

by Pastor Scott Thomas, Acts 29 Director

I received the following email recently and felt as though I needed to address this issue globally as we receive a fair number of inquiries from young men with "church planting fever." Unfortunately, the prognosis for this disease, if left unchecked, is a catastrophic ministry experience. The only cure is the gospel. It is administered only to the humble.

Please note: I changed the names and locations and dates of the email to protect the author's identity.

Scott,

I am under 22 years old; been in ministry for 3 years; Jesus, Piper, Driscoll, and Chandler are my heroes; I'm now at a seminary with about 3 years left on my degree and I've become accustomed to (and enjoy) studying 6-8 hours a day; I feel God has possibly been leading me in the direction of church planting for 2 years now since I started podcasting all of Mark's stuff, and that desire has grown exponentially lately.

This all said, I don't intend to purposefully stay unmarried for my life, but I do not know God's will for whether or not I marry. I probably will end up getting married.

1) The thought of the amount of time sacrificed to have a strong, healthy marriage scares me. When I think of sex, I think of the amount of hours I will lose per week that I could have used to read some John Owen. But I also love kids, would love to have a family, and know the benefits of being married as far as ministry is concerned - Paul's words of marrying just haunt me, because I've heard Mark's schedule, and so much of it is family time - but perhaps he needs that to revitalize him after working such a long week?

*2) I have the deepest and utmost respect for the marriage covenant and want to be sure that I, nor she, **ever** seriously considers divorce. I probably would not propose to a girl before having a relationship with her for at least 1.5-2 years. That being the case, I graduate in less than 3 years with my seminary degree, so I probably will not be married when I graduate. If I feel God still leading me to Acts 29, then I would like to plant right after graduation, when I will most likely still be single. If I'm going to marry, I would **much** prefer to do it before pastoring in any capacity, but I can't really control that.*

I sent him the following email:

Dear Church Planter,

Here are my random thoughts to your reply. I was stricken in my spirit with your response. I humbly offer these ten suggestions in an attempt to help you understand the will of the Lord.

1. I believe men should be able to integrate the expression of the gospel with life. Your marriage, wife (and hours of sex) DOES NOT compete with your ministry. The gospel is lived out through these relationships and not apart from it. A marriage (and marriage bed) is a biblical proclamation of the gospel, specifically the love of the bridegroom/Jesus with the bride/Church. Jesus said that unbelievers would be able to recognize that we are Christians by our love, sacrifice and unity with one another. The marriage and the home is the perfect example. A man's family is not a diversion from the pressures of ministry, as you suggest, but rather, a part of his holistic life ministry, his first flock and the primary credible witness of his character.

2. Get into a church that is a church plant and serve for a few years. Find a pastor under whom you can learn, be mentored, challenged spiritually and later be commended for the ministry. Even if you do not fully agree with how the pastor does ministry (and you probably won't), serve Jesus, the body and in submission to spiritual authority as an example of the gospel working in and through your life.

3. Start engaging people, living people (not dead puritans), who are not Christians. If you want to influence people, combine your studies with the interaction of unbelievers. They will help you to know the questions they are asking. Without that, your studies are skeletons without flesh. The puritans wrote their sermons by answering the objections of their hearers. That is why they were so lengthy. The only way your studying will have an impact in people's life is to share truth with them on their turf—in their homes, places of work, neighborhoods and cultural events. Jesus went away to pray, but was often found eating and drinking with sinners.

4. Be humble. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Young men with limited experience and a lot of academic knowledge are often puffed up with pride. This man is rarely usable until the gospel has taken root in his heart and he recognizes the honor of serving the King of kings with gifts bestowed by the King for His own glory.

5. Focus on the biblical requirements of an elder and seek to be the man he wants you to become and not just focused on the information you think you may need. A man's character—above reproach—is the foundation for all other gospel ministry. Too often, a man desires the office of an elder and equips his mind with knowledge and neglects the weightier matters of prayer, intimacy with God, silence, solitude, obedience, repentance, confession, kindness and obtaining a

missionary heart. Make sure you are called to eldership and follow Him passionately.

6. Be patient. The Apostle Paul was sent to the Arabian Desert for three years before preaching (probably around 33 years old). Jesus waited until he was 30 years old to start his public ministry. Abraham waited. Jacob waited. Joseph waited. Noah waited. Daniel waited. Isaiah waited. Young men hate to wait. They are ready to charge Hell with a squirt gun. Abraham Lincoln said, "I will get ready and then, perhaps my chance will come." Do everything you can to get ready to plant a church. Study, pray, obey, find a mentor, engage in a servant ministry, share your faith humbly, connect missionally with unbelievers, minister to children who are fatherless, serve widows in their affliction, and keep yourself unspotted from the world. Then wait for the Holy Spirit to lead you.

7. Start a missional community in your home. Live the gospel together, pray together, serve the neighborhood together, share your faith together, learn the Bible together, be on mission together, and replicate other groups from your smaller community. If you can't start and sustain a smaller community of faith, you will never have a biblical template for a church plant.

8. Read other authors. Don't limit your intake to a few popular speakers and authors. Read from and listen to pastors from multiple theological backgrounds.

9. Research church planting. Know what it entails and count the cost before you start building (Luke 14). Consider doing a one or two year internship with a church planting training center.

10. Get a job, secure a place to live, get married, have children, practice the gospel in your own home, and then plant a church. Being married is not a biblical requirement for a pastor or church planter, but it is advised.

You may not understand now, but I believe you will be best served if you at least considered these thoughts from a pastor who has ministered full-time for 27 years.

In the love of the gospel,

Scott